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Ruskin's Politics

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Ruskin's Politics

By

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THERE have been very few men, I think, in whom our manifold nature has been more marked than in Ruskin. If you go round this Exhibition, you will find several portraits exhibited as portraits of Ruskin ; but it is surprising what a number of other people they are portraits of. Somewhere behind me on that wall, there is a bronze dish ; and on that bronze a portrait of Ruskin in profile. That is one of the most remarkable portraits in the Exhibition, because whatever its merits may be as a portrait of Ruskin—and probably some of you will have said on seeing it, ‘That is not very like the Ruskin we are familiar with,’—it is not at all a bad portrait of Mozart. Almost all the genuine portraits of Mozart are profiles. No doubt some of you have been taken in by the usual music-shop portrait of a handsome young nobleman who was a contemporary of Mozart. But in the genuine Mozart portraits there is a peculiar salience about the

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profile ; you will see in them that Mozart's upper lip came out with a certain vivacity in it peculiar to the man, which spoils his beauty as compared with the portrait of the nobleman, but nevertheless gives you the great musician, who at the end of his life subordinated his music to his social enthusiasms and wrote his last opera nominally on the subject of freemasonry, but really on that social upheaval which was then preparing the French Revolution and has been developing ever since. Now look over there to my left ; and you will see a portrait of Ruskin by Herkomer. But it is more like John Stuart Mill. If you look at some of the photographs that were taken in the Lake country, when Ruskin was an elderly man, those of you who enjoyed the acquaintance of Grant Allen will be struck by the fact that they are very good portraits of Grant Allen : you feel that if Grant had lived a little longer, he would have been exactly like that.

Thus the portraits give you by their resemblances the evolution of the artist into the prophet. He begins as a painter, a lover of music, a poet and rhetorician,

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and presently becomes an economist and sociologist, finally developing sociology and economics into a religion, as all economics and sociology that are worth anything do finally develop. You follow him from Mozart to Mill, picking up on the way the man of science, Grant Allen, also a little in the sociological line, but very much interested in science and material things, and material forms and shapes, just as Ruskin is in *Modern Painters*. Finally you have the portraits made by Mr. Severn of Ruskin in his latest time, when Ruskin was hardly a human being at all, when almost the nearest resemblance that occurs to you is his resemblance to God as depicted in Blake's *Book of Job*. You get, in short, to an almost divine condition.

I dare say you have already had lectures on all the phases of Ruskin represented in those portraits; and now it has come to my turn to deal with Ruskin as a politician. I think Ruskin was more misunderstood as a politician than in any other department of his activity. People complained that he was unintelligible. I do not think he was unintelligible. If you read his political

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utterances, the one thing that you cannot say of them is that they were unintelligible. You would imagine that no human being could ever have been under the slightest delusion as to what Ruskin meant and was driving at. But what really puzzled his readers—and incidentally saved his life, because he certainly would have been hanged if they had grasped what he was driving at, and believed that he believed it—was that he was incredible. You see, he appealed to the educated, cultivated, and discontented. It is true that he addressed himself to the working-classes generally; and you can find among the working-classes, just as Mr. Charles Rowley has found in the Ancoats quarter of Manchester, a certain proportion of working-men who have intellectual tastes and artistic interests. But in all classes his disciples were the few who were at war with commercial civilization. I have met in my lifetime some extremely revolutionary characters; and quite a large number of them, when I have asked, ‘Who put you on to this revolutionary line? Was it Karl Marx?’ have answered, ‘No, it was Ruskin’. Generally the Ruskinite is the

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most thoroughgoing of the opponents of our existing state of society.

Now the reason why the educated and cultured classes in this country found Ruskin incredible was that they could not bring themselves to believe that he meant what he was saying, and indeed shouting. He was even shouting in such terms that if I were to describe it merely as abusive I should underdo the description. Think of the way in which his readers were brought up! They were educated at our public schools and universities; they moved in a society which fitted in with those public schools and universities; they had been brought up from their earliest childhood as above everything respectable people; taught that what respectable people did was the right and proper thing to do, was good form and also high culture; that such people were the salt of the earth; that everything that existed in the way of artistic culture depended on their cultured and leisured existence. When you have people saturated from their childhood with views of that kind, and they are suddenly confronted with a violently contrary view, they are unable to take it in

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For instance, to put it quite simply, they knew that there were the Ten Commandments, and that the Ten Commandments were all right ; and they argued from this that as respectable people were all right in everything they did they must be living according to the Ten Commandments. Therefore their consciences were entirely untroubled.

I have here a volume of Ruskin which I took up this morning, intending to read it, but had not time. I opened it at random, and happened on a page on which Ruskin gave the Ten Commandments according to which in his conception our polite and cultured society really lives. This is the only passage I shall read to-day, though I feel, of course, the temptation that every lecturer on Ruskin feels to get out of his job by reading, because anything he reads is likely to be better than anything he can say of his own. Ruskin says :

‘ Generally the ten commandments are now:
Thou shalt have any other god but me.
Thou shalt worship every bestial imagination
on earth and under it. Thou shalt take the
name of the Lord in vain to mock the poor ;

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for the Lord will hold him guiltless who rebukes and gives not ; thou shalt remember the sabbath day to keep it profane ; thou shalt dishonour thy father and thy mother ; thou shalt kill, and kill by the million, with all thy might and mind and wealth spent in machinery for multifold killing ; thou shalt look on every woman to lust after her ; thou shalt steal, and steal from morning till evening ; the evil from the good, and the rich from the poor ; thou shalt live by continual lying in million-fold sheets of lies ; and covet thy neighbour's house, and country, and wealth and fame, and everything that is his. And finally, by word of the Devil, in short summary, through Adam Smith, a new commandment give I unto you : that ye hate one another.'

If anybody is going to tell me, here or elsewhere, that this is unintelligible, I do not know what to think of that person's brains. Nothing could well be clearer. But, as I have said, and repeat, it was profoundly incredible to those to whom it was addressed.

Ruskin's political message to the cultured society of his day, the class to which he himself belonged, began and ended in this simple judgement : 'You are a parcel of thieves.' That is what it came to. He

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never went away from that ; and he enforced it with a very extraordinary power of invective. Ruskin was a master of invective. Compare him, for instance, with Cobbett. Cobbett had immense literary style ; and when he hated a thing, he hated it very thoroughly indeed. Think of Cobbett's writing about the funding system—think of his writing about the spoliation of the Church by Henry VIII—think of his writing about the barrenness of Surrey, which cultured society likes so much and which Cobbett loathed as a barren place—think of what he said about ‘barbarous, bestial Malthus’—think of Cobbett at the height of his vituperation. Then go on to Karl Marx. Karl Marx was a Jew who had, like Jeremiah, a great power of invective. Think of the suppression of the Paris Commune of 1871, and then of that terrific screed that Marx wrote, exposing the Empire, denouncing the Versailles generals, execrating the whole order of things which destroyed the Commune so remorselessly. There you have a masterpiece of invective, a thing which, although it was not reproduced in any of the newspapers, or popular literary issues

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of the day, nevertheless did leave such an effect that when, thirty years after, a proposal was made in the French Chamber to put Gallifet into a public position of some credit, the governing classes having forgotten that a word had ever been said against him, suddenly that terrible denunciation of Marx rose up against him and struck him absolutely out of public life. Yet when you read these invectives of Marx and Cobbett, and read Ruskin's invectives afterwards, somehow or other you feel that Ruskin beats them hollow. Perhaps the reason was that they hated their enemy so thoroughly. Ruskin does it without hatred, and therefore he does it with a magnificent thoroughness. You may say that his strength in invective is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure. And the only consequence of his denunciation of society was that people said, 'Well, he can't possibly be talking about us, the respectable people'; and so they did not take any notice of it.

I must now go on to Ruskin's specific contribution to economics and sociology, because that, as you know, to-day means a contribution to politics. In Ruskin's

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own time this was not so clear. People did not understand then that your base in politics must be an economic base and a sociological base. We all know it to-day, and know it to our cost ; and will know it to our still greater cost unless we find a way out, which, it seems, lies not very far from Ruskin's way. Ruskin took up the treatises of our classic political economy, the books by which our Manchester Capitalism sought to justify its existence. In this he did what Karl Marx had done before ; and, like Marx, he did it in a way which I do not like exactly to describe as a corrupt way, because you cannot think of corruption in connexion with Ruskin : nevertheless, he did not take it up as a man with a disinterested academic enthusiasm for abstract political economy. I think we must admit that, like Marx, he took it up because he was clever enough to see that it was a very good stick to beat the Capitalist dog with. Marx took up the theory of value which had been begun by Adam Smith, and developed by Malthus, and, seeing that he could turn it against Capitalism, tried to re-establish it on a basis of his own. Thus we got his celebrated

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theory of value, which is now a celebrated blunder. What Ruskin did was this. He held up to us the definition of value given by the economists, and said: 'These gentlemen define value as value in exchange. Therefore', he said, 'a thing that you cannot exchange has no value: a thing that you can exchange has value. Very well. When on my way to Venice I go through Paris, I can buy there for two francs fifty an obscene lithograph, produced by the French to sell to English tourists. When I reach Venice, I go to the Scuola di San Rocco and look at the ceiling painted there by Tintoretto, because it is one of the treasures of the world. But that ceiling cannot be sold in the market. It has no exchange value. Therefore, according to John Stuart Mill, the obscene lithograph has a higher value than the ceiling, which in fact has no value at all. After that, I have no further use for your political economy. If that is the way you begin, I hesitate to go on to the end; for I know where your journey must land you—in hell. You may be under the impression that after all hell is a thing you can think of later on; but you are mistaken: you

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are already at your destination: the condition in which you are living is virtually hell.' Then he gave his version of your Ten Commandments. If you had said to him, 'We may be in hell; but we feel extremely comfortable', Ruskin, being a genuinely religious man, would have replied, 'That simply shows that you are damned to the uttermost depths of damnation, because not only are you in hell, but you like being in hell'.

Ruskin got no farther than that in political economy. It was really a pregnant contribution; but he did not go on. Having knocked the spurious law of value into a cocked hat, he did not go on to discover a scientific law of value; and he took no interest in and never reached that other very revolutionary law, the law of economic rent. I see no sign in his writings that he ever discovered it.

When Karl Marx (let me make this contrast) demonstrated that, in his phrase, the working-man was being exploited by the Capitalist—and Karl Marx took a great deal of trouble to establish what he called the rate of surplus value: that is to say, the rate at which the Capitalist was robbing

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the working-man—he made a pretence of doing the thing mathematically. He was not a mathematician; but he had a weakness for posing as a mathematician and using algebraic symbols. He tried to determine the quantitative aspect of exploitation. That sort of thing did not interest Ruskin. Ruskin said to the Capitalist, ‘You are either a thief or an honest man. I have discovered that you are a thief. It does not matter to me whether you are a fifty per cent. thief or a seventy per cent. thief. That may be interesting to men of business who are interested in figures. I am not. Sufficient to me that you are a thief. Having found out that you are a thief, I can now tell you what your taste in art will be. And as I do not like a thievish taste in art I suggest you should become an honest man.’ And I dare say the Capitalists who read it said: ‘Aha! that serves Jones right!’ I doubt if they ever applied it to themselves.

Though Ruskin was certainly not a completely equipped economist, I put him nevertheless with Jevons as one of the great economists, because he knocked the first great hole in classic economics by

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showing that its value basis was an inhuman and unreal basis, and could not without ruin to civilization be accepted as a basis for society at all. Then Jevons came along and exploded the classic value theory from the abstract scientific side. Marx also never grasped the law of rent, never understood one bit of it any more than Ruskin. Nevertheless Marx did establish Marxism, a thing of which you hear a good deal, and which is therefore worth defining. Marxism does not mean this or that particular theory: it does mean that the economic question is fundamental in politics and sociology. No doubt some of Marx's disciples—after the way of disciples—have pushed that view a little hard. You know that some of the curators of the Natural History Museum at South Kensington are eminent naturalists and palaeontologists. In my youth—I do not know whether they do it still—their favourite swank was to say, 'If you will bring us the smallest bone of any extinct monster, from that small bone we can reconstruct the whole monster'. I remember in my youth being impressed by that—not so much by the wonderful thing they said they could do, as by their clever-

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ness in discovering how safe it was to say they could do it: for when they had reconstructed the monster, who could come along and prove that it was not a bit like the original? Nobody could produce a live monster from his back garden and compare the two.

In the same way Marx said, in effect, 'If you will bring me the tool or machine with which a man worked, I will deduce from it with infallible certainty his politics, his religion, his philosophy, and his view of history and morals'. That, of course, like the South Kensington offer, was a great swank. Nevertheless it epitomizes an important truth, and makes you feel the dramatic power with which Marx brought into economics and politics his view of the fundamental importance of economics. Our own historian, Buckle, had taken very much the same line; but I think I can give you a simpler illustration of the importance of the economic basis, and why it was that Ruskin, beginning as an artist with an interest in art—exactly as I did myself, by the way—was inevitably driven back to economics, and to the conviction that your art would never

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come right whilst your economics were wrong.

The illustration I will give you is this. Here am I addressing you, a cultivated audience. I wish to keep before you the most elevated view of all the questions Ruskin dealt with. I am straining all my mental faculties and drawing on all my knowledge. Now suppose you were to chain me to this table and invite me to go on and on. What would happen? Well, after some hours a change would take place in the relative importance of the things presenting themselves to my mind. At first, I should be thinking of Ruskin, and attending to my business here as a lecturer on Ruskin. But at last my attention would shift from the audience in front of me to that corner of the room behind me, because that is where the refreshment room is. I should in fact be thinking of nothing but my next meal. I should finally reach a point at which, though I am a vegetarian, I should be looking at the chubbiest person in the audience, and wishing I could eat that chubby person.

That is the real soundness of Marxism and of Ruskin's change of ground from

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art to economics. You may aim at making a man cultured and religious; but you must feed him first; and you must feed him to the point at which he is reasonably happy, because if you feed him only to the point at which you can make a bare drudge of him and not make him happy, then in his need for a certain degree of happiness he will go and buy artificial happiness at the public-house and other places. Working-men do that at the present day: indeed we all do it to a certain extent, because all our lives are made more or less unhappy by our economic slavery, whether we are slaves or masters. Economics are fundamental in politics: you must begin with the feeding of the individual. Unless you build on that, all your superstructure will be rotten.

There you have the condition postulated by Marx and every sensible man. That is why Ruskin, when he was twenty, gave you *Modern Painters*, and at thirty, *The Stones of Venice*, also about art, but very largely about the happiness of working-men who made the art; for the beauty of Venice is a reflection of the happiness of the men who made Venice. When he was

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forty he wrote *Unto this Last*, and there took you very far away from art and very close to politics. At fifty he gave us the *Inaugural Lectures*, and, finally, *Fors Clavigera*, in which you find his most tremendous invectives against modern society.

Now since Ruskin's contemporaries neglected him politically because they found the plain meaning of his words incredible, I put the question whether in the course of time there has developed any living political activity on behalf of which you might enlist Ruskin if he were living at the present time. It goes without saying, of course, that he was a Communist. He was quite clear as to that. But now comes the question, What was his attitude towards Democracy? Well, it was another example of the law that no really great man is ever a democrat in the vulgar sense, by which I mean that sense in which Democracy is identified with our modern electoral system and our system of voting. Ruskin never gave one moment's quarter to all that. He set no store by it whatever, any more than his famous contemporary, Charles Dickens—in his own particular department the most gifted English

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writer since Shakespeare, and resembling Ruskin in being dominated by a social conscience. Dickens was supposed to be an extremely popular person, always on the side of the people against the ruling class; whereas Ruskin might, as a comparatively rich University man, have been expected to be on the other side. Yet Dickens gives no more quarter to Democracy than Ruskin. He begins by unmasking mere superficial abuses like the Court of Chancery and imprisonment for debt, imagining them to be fundamental abuses. Then, suddenly discovering that it is the whole framework of society that is wrong, he writes *Hard Times*, and after that becomes a prophet as well as a storyteller. You must not imagine that prophets are a dead race, who died with Habakkuk and Joel. The prophets are always with us. We have [*indicating Dr. Inge, the Dean of St. Paul's*] some of them in this room at the present time. But Dickens the prophet is never Dickens the Democrat. Take any book of his in which he plays his peculiar trick of putting before you some shameful social abuse, and then asking what is to be done about it! Does

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he in any single instance say: 'You working-men who have the majority of votes: what are you going to do about it?' He never does. He always appeals to the aristocracy. He says: 'Your Majesty, my lords and gentlemen, right honourables and wrong honourables of every degree: what have you to say to this?' When he introduces a working-man, he may make that working-man complain bitterly that society is all wrong; but when the plutocrats turn round on that man and say to him, 'Oh, you think yourself very clever. What would you do? You complain about everything. What would you do to set things right?' he makes the working-man say, 'It is not for the like of me to say. It is the business of people who have the power and the knowledge to understand these things, and take it on themselves to right them.' That is the attitude of Dickens, and the attitude of Ruskin; and that really is my attitude as well. The people at large are occupied with their own special jobs; and the reconstruction of society is a very special job indeed. To tell the people to make their own laws is to mock them just as I should mock you

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if I said, 'Gentlemen : you are the people : write your own plays'. The people are the judges of the laws and of plays ; but they can never be the makers of them.

Thus Ruskin, like Dickens, understood that the reconstruction of society must be the work of an energetic and conscientious minority. Both of them knew that the government of a country is always the work of a minority, energetic, possibly conscientious, possibly the reverse, too often a merely predatory minority which produces an illusion of conscientiousness by setting up a convention that what they want for their own advantage is for the good of society. They pay very clever people to prove it ; and the clever people argue themselves into believing it. The Manchester or anti-Ruskin school had plenty of sincere and able apologists. If you read Austin's lectures on jurisprudence, for instance, you will find a more complete acknowledgement of the horrors inevitable under Capitalism than in most Socialist writers, because Austin had convinced himself that they are the price of liberty and of progress. But then nobody in his day conceived Socialism as a practical

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alternative : indeed it was not then practicable. Austin's argument, or rather his choice of evils, is no longer forced on us ; so we need not concern ourselves about it except as a demonstration that Ruskin's scepticism as to government by the people as distinguished from government of the people for the people is shared by his most extreme and logical opponents as well as by his kindred spirits.

Is there, then, any existing political system in operation in Europe at this moment which combines Communism with a belief in government by an energetic and enlightened minority, and whose leaders openly say, 'There is no use talking about Democracy. If reforms are to wait until a majority of the people are converted to an intelligent belief in them, no reforms will ever be made at all. If we, whose intentions are honest, wait for such an impossible conversion, the only result of our sitting down and doing nothing will be that another energetic majority, whose intentions are evil, will seize the lead and govern in our stead. Democracy in that sense would be merely an excuse to enable us to go on talking, without ever being

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called upon to take the responsibility of doing anything. Moreover, our opponents would kill us'?

Can you point to any political body in Europe which is now taking that line? Let me lead you to it gently.

In Germany, Socialism has been represented by the Social-Democrats; and they had a great apparent democratic success in the way of getting members into parliament, and becoming the largest group there, besides founding many newspapers, and figuring as an established institution in the country. Their theoretic spokesman is Kautsky. Some years before the war there was a certain Internationalist Socialist Congress. As usual there was some controversy between the French and the Germans, the French being led by Jaurès, who was then happily still alive. The Germans claimed superior authority in the Socialist movement because they were so much more largely and systematically organized. They cited their numerous branches, their newspapers, their millions of votes, and their representation in Parliament, in which, by the way, they had a self-denying ordinance that none

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of them should take office until the Capitalist system was overthrown. This saved them much trouble. They had only to sit and criticize their opponents; and they criticized them very eloquently and very thoroughly. When the German leader, Bebel, had detailed all those advantages and thrown them at the head of the French, he said, 'What have you French Socialists to show in the way of Socialist organization comparable to that?' Jaurès simply said: 'Ah, if we had all that in France, SOMETHING WOULD HAPPEN.' Which shut up the German party.

You see, it had been driven in on Jaurès, himself a great talker, that mere talking is no use. It comes to no more than the talking about Christianity which has been going on for nineteen hundred years, during which official Christianity has been incessantly trying to find excuses for disregarding the teaching of Christ. I remember when I was busy as an unpaid and quite sincere Socialist agitator in this country—there were twelve years of my life during which I delivered a long public address on Socialism certainly three times a fortnight—one of the things that puzzled

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me at first was that I met with so little opposition. I found that I was almost like a clergyman talking pious platitudes. Nobody objected. Nothing happened. I apparently carried my audiences enthusiastically with me. Nevertheless Capitalism went on just the same. I began to understand that the leaders of Socialism, the men with the requisite brains and political comprehension, must not wait as Kautsky would have them wait on the plea that you must do nothing until you have converted the people, and can win a bloodless victory through the ballot-box. The people seldom know what they want, and never know how to get it.

As against Kautsky, Europe has in the field a very interesting statesman named Nicholas Lenin. He says, 'As long as you talk like that, you will not do anything, and don't really mean to do anything. In this world things are done by men who have convictions, who believe those convictions to be right, and who are prepared with all the strength they have or can rally to them to impose appropriate institutions on the vast majority who are themselves as incapable of making

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the institutions as of inventing the telescope or calculating the distance of the nearest fixed star.'

Do not forget that this attitude of Lenin is the attitude not only of all the prophets, but of, say, Mr. Winston Churchill and Mr. Arthur Balfour. All our military and governing people who have practical experience of State affairs know that the people, for good or evil, must, whether they will or no, be finally governed by people capable of governing, and that the people themselves know this instinctively, and mistrust all democratic doctrinaires. If you like to call Bolshevism a combination of the Tory oligarchism of Ruskin and Mr. Winston Churchill with the Tory Communism of Ruskin alone, you may. So it comes to this, that when we look for a party which could logically claim Ruskin to-day as one of its prophets, we find it in the Bolshevik party. (Laughter.) You laugh at this. You feel it to be absurd. But I have given you a demonstration; and I want you now to pick a hole in the demonstration if you can. You got out of the difficulty in Ruskin's own time by saying that he was a Tory. He said so

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himself. But then you did not quite grasp the fact that all Socialists are Tories in that sense. The Tory is a man who believes that those who are qualified by nature and training for public work, and who are naturally a minority, have to govern the mass of the people. That is Toryism. That is also Bolshevism. The Russian masses elected a National Assembly: Lenin and the Bolsheviks ruthlessly shoved it out of the way, and indeed shot it out of the way as far as it refused to be shoved.

Some of you, in view of the shooting, repudiate Bolshevism as a blood-stained tyranny, and revolt against the connexion of Ruskin's name with it. But if you are never going to follow any prophet in whose name Governments have been guilty of killing those who resist them, you will have to repudiate your country, your religion, and your humanity. Let us be humble. There is no use in throwing these terms at one another. You cannot repudiate religion because it has been connected with the atrocities of the wars of religion. You cannot, for instance, ask any Roman Catholic to repudiate his Church because

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of the things that were done in the Inquisition, or any Protestant to admit that Luther must stand or fall by the acts of the soldiers of Gustavus Adolphus. All you can do is to deplore the atrocities. Lenin said the other day, 'Yes: there have been atrocities; and they have not all been inevitable'. I wish every other statesman in Europe had the same candour. Look at all that has been done not only by Bolshevists, but by anti-Bolshevists, by ourselves, and by all the belligerents! There is only one thing that it becomes us to say; and that is, 'God forgive us all'.

END

